

8-20-1987

# Relationships of light and the spirit

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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
The College of Fine and Applied Arts  
in Canidacy for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

RELATIONSHIPS OF LIGHT AND THE SPIRIT

By

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August 20, 1987

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## Relationships of Light and Spirit

The purpose of this thesis is to produce a series of watercolor paintings developed through direct observation of family life, to depict a sincere spirit and contemporary approach to painting in the eighties. My impressions of the relationships of figures enveloped in light patterns attempt to capture that immutable and eternal human spirit. Through the media of watercolor flowing on a fragile paper surface and a method of serialization through which all painting develops, my paintings, hopefully, will take on a life of their own.

Painting figures in watercolor, my favorite medium, what a challenge! Could I do it? What a difficult task I had chosen for myself. I had to draw upon the area I knew best, impressions and relationships from my family. I had to learn how the other artists had produced the beautiful aesthetic expressions of their family and friends. I had to perfect my drawing skills by an intensive study of drawing. The reason for all this I felt was, a good watercolorist needs fluency of effortlessness in execution of a painting. In addition, perfection of color palette, color values and composition were required by myself to achieve the subjective sensitiveness without the binds of technological struggle.

My paintings were to be direct, fresh and contemporary. They needed to flow in an effortless concert of disciplined lines, forms, shapes, values, color, texture and rhythm to produce a sincere painting expressing the subject of my family life.

Artists, References and Influences

The subject of the family lead me to research Fairfield Porter, a realist painter in the "Age of Abstraction". Porter gave me courage to begin developing ideas and my work began taking on an Impressionist quality, I looked to Porter for he had observed, "Impressionism was the painterly way of recreating the presence of reality". At the same time I Vuillard and Velazquez were the backbones of his art, these being his favorite painters. Porter's paintings of quiet family scenes, such as people reading, the sunlight pouring through the windows of his home and the family room with its extensive warm color and sensitive development of color value relationships, all helped fertilize my imagination and expand my vision. Porter often made the point that there is no essential difference between abstract and representational art and that each is real or has presence in a different way.

In Porter's paintings the figures are relaxed, still, quiet, posed, semi-posed and also flat footed. Everything is natural, normal and straight forward. The psychology aimed at is always direct, warm and uncomplicated. The real subject matter is the entire scene and its peculiar effort of light. This subject matter conspires with his sense of form to create the bright "impersonality" and understatement of his mature work. His paintings are a struggle for instinct and conscience. It was through Porter's influence that I gained insights in my early painting that would eventually enable me to explore the attitudes of family life through my own intuition.

"Vuillard, a great painter, transformed the ordinary surroundings of his life into visions of eternal beauty. He succeeded in glorifying the common place by an extraordinary aesthetic and poetic concentration, finding it beautiful to the eye. He did not reveal himself personally in his art; he revealed the world he lived in with distinction and charm that commands admiration".<sup>2</sup>



Vuillard found beauty in family life, occupational situations, intimist interiors and out door scenes. He explored his vision through the study of light patterns flickering on figures involved in numerous common place occurrences through the media of printmaking.

"Vuillard used line color and texture to intermix with pictorial facilities, so one can't tell where the scene is felt or expressed". 3

Alex Katz, realist painter of family and friends, said,

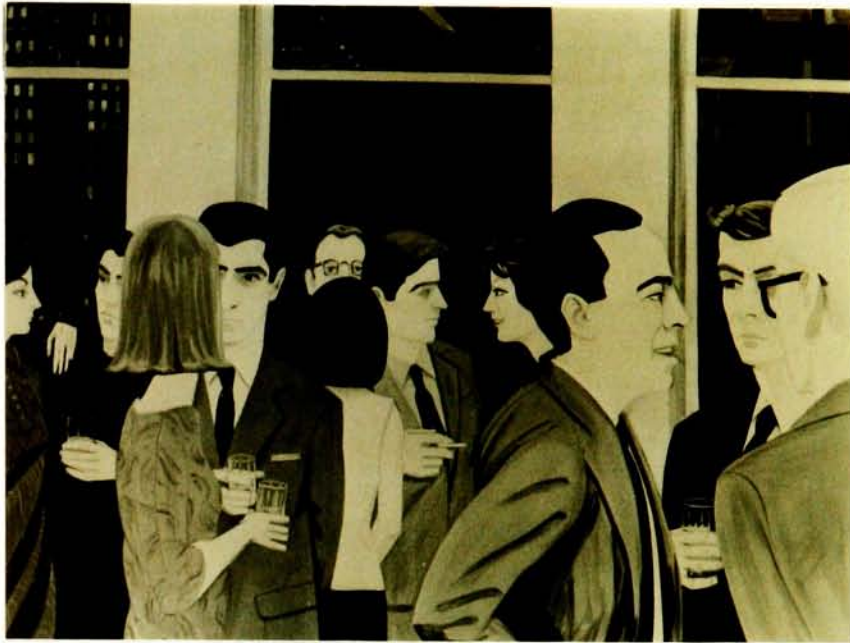
"Much beauty eludes our vision or is distracted by polluted, sociological and enterprising ventures. His first attempts appeared to fix in memory time passages and mere glimpses into life as it passed silently by". 4

The resonance of Katz's art lies in its seamless amalgam of sources into its own distinct style. His work adroitly and intelligently synthesizes influences and impulses that emerge from and respond to the contemporary world. Alex Katz is a modern person and wants his paintings to be modern.

Alex Katz's work is in fact not empty but full of formal social and psychological references both historical and current. For instance the figures in modern social environments interacting with each other in today's society in the painting "The Cocktail Party".

I also noted Katz's light on the figures in the painting. Our light from our environment extends into the light in Katz's painting leading our vision from our surroundings into his illusionistic statement.

In part I owe my courage to Alex Katz to search for the philosophy of the immediate. By this statement I refer to situations an artist may observe from day to day. It is a moment in time that is captured and created into art by the artist promoting a celebration of the ordinary. In pursuing the philosophy of the immediate, I feel the artist does not



"The Cocktail Party" by Alex Katz



search in the past or predict the future, the approach is here now and direct. The search locates and records the contemporary scene cognitively, intuitively and technically.

While studying the Impressionists to explore their individual expressions of light patterns, compositions, color palettes, figures and such, I developed my own personal artistic response toward similar objectives. I researched Camille Pissarro, Pierre Bonnard, Rembrandt, Mary Cassatt and John Singer Sargent. The painted light patterns, the compositions, the color palettes, the figures and the techniques of these artists intrigued me.

First I looked to Camille Pissarro for his philosophy and found in his letters to his son Lucien (1900-1903) these words.

Pissarro wrote,

"Gothic Artists are inventors and we have to perform, not better which is impossible, but differently and following our own bent. We have to approach nature sincerely, with our own modern sensibilities, imitation or invention is something else again. Observe, that it is a grave error to believe that all mediums of art are not closely tied to their time. It has been my view for a long time that it is not a question of pretty Italian Elegance, but of using our eyes a bit and disregarding what is style. Reflect all in sincerity". E

My paintings are not attempts to be portraits, but are paintings that reflect attitudes of humans leaving viewers hopefully trying to relate to their own individual memories.

I felt Rembrandt's influence as I worked on wood cuts and zinc plates. The process of layering and altering contrasts and design helped to develop the watercolor glazes in my own work.

"Mary Cassatt painted what she saw in front of her, and the evanescent light in which she saw it, as was customary among her fellow Impressionists."67

Mary Cassatt was free from sentimentality in her paintings of mothers and children. Her work was direct, true, psychological and sensitive in a uniquely penetrating way. By studying Mary Cassatt's work I learned stylized figures and contrived settings were not the direction to pursue in my painting.

My work actually developed under some of the same conditions as John Singer Sargent. The difference being that my work centered in the living areas of my home with family members always present.

"Unlike many artists the presence of visitors or companions did not disturb John Sargent's activity. He worked without obvious exertion even in his most intensive concentration. His manner of work was of consummate address for he did not show any physical or mental effort. His own creed was stable and unaffected by transitory influences although he appreciated innovators in all areas of endeavor" 7

"John Sargent's art is brilliant in technique, dazzling in its radiant surface effects and cosmopolitan in its range of subjects. He was self assured, unhesitant and generally detached from personal and moral involvement with subjects in his

art. Sargent emphasized light on objects rather than physical substance. His work exhibits technical brilliance and charm, with nostalgia and artifice modified by the actualities of the person or the site. Sargent manipulated technique to display a surface value of forms." 81

One of Sargent's theories was that modern painters make a mistake in showing that they know too much about the substance they paint. Sargent thought that the artist ought to know nothing whatever about the nature of the object before him but should concentrate all powers on representation of its appearance. The picture was to be a consistent reproduction of the area witnessed by the eye. Hence in a very curious way, the aspect of a substance became much more real to him than the substance itself.

In Sargent's "The Oyster Gatherers of Cancale" the silvery hue attracted my attention. I found in studying Sargent's watercolor paintings I made memory patterns of light impressions that attracted my vision. My objective was not to copy Sargent but to acquire a subjective alertness to my surroundings. This would enable me to see possible subjects for paintings by making pencil sketches of what attracted my attention.



The Oyster Gatherers of Cancale



An additional course in Drawing Problems disciplined my vision further by enabling me to draw more rapidly, more expressionistically and more accurately. My execution of linear form began to loose its acadenic approach as the lines expressed energy and contrast. Instead of using graphite I now chose water soluble pencils and Stabillo's to provide the strong drawing needed in watercolor painting. The colored pencil lines varying in strength and width added interest to the fragile image watercolors were producing.

John Singer Sargent influenced me at this time for I felt a need to improve my color palette. My colors at this point were still forced and artificial. I needed to go back to direct observation of color as I painted from life.

To help develop this color concept I took another course of study using pastels while drawing and coloring portraits. The layering of the colors to achieve likeness and form, values and contrasts provided more memory patterns.

Enrichment of color with pastels was much different than using watercolor for me at this point. The pastel color did not creep over edges and did not turn muddy when I placed another color over it like watercolor did.

To try to meld the two mediums became my next experiment as I painted a large figure in watercolor and placed pastel textures and marks over the surface. The painting was strong in color but did not flow in some areas. I had learned that I did not want my paintings to be in mixed media at this time. I tried many small paintings with this process until my color began to take on some glowing light patterns and delicate neutrals. Still searching for color information I discovered Pierre Bonnard and his beautiful paintings, outstanding for their spellbinding color, shifting perspective and flattening of space.

Pierre Bonnard frequently cropped figures and objects on the edges of his canvases. A good example of this is his "Piazza del Popolo, Rome" painted in 1922. Also, the entire

canvas is lit, as if from within. From Pierre Bonnard I began developing intuitive concepts of figurative compositions, subtle color values, memory patterns and reflective light on various surfaces.



No.3 Piazza del Popolo, Rome

As the study of painting progressed I attempted to solve each particular problem, one at a time. These were the balance of dark value patterns, bare paper areas that expressed sparkling light and reflected intense light patterns, middle values that glowed with light and wove their way through each composition.

At the same time, I kept sketching from life for the preparation of a painting to capture the essence of the light patterns and the psychology of the scene at hand.

Printmaking was used to continue to develop my sketches from life. Woodcuts and etchings helped me in my exploration of interesting light and dark value patterns. Each time I attempted a piece of art, the work came closer to the end result I was seeking. I would recognize the image I was after when it would finally appear.



The final stages of experimental work were spent relinquishing the documentation of each individual area in the painting. I was now concentrating on (1) multiple coloration in middle value areas, (2) dark contrasting patterns that still retained light, (3) edges that appeared and diminished from one object or figure to another, (4) light shifting in a beautiful visual pattern through the painting, (5) the water soluble energy lines appearing and disappearing created by Stabilo pencils, holding the structural drawing of the composition intact, (6) the color palette that was personal and expressive, intuitive and sensitive and (7) the end result, finally a painting!

The relinquishment of documentation was the most difficult for me. Years of commercial and illustrative work had forced me into hard edged forms that could be painted clearly for their respective value. Now I could depart from this discipline to another more rigorous and demanding than the first.

### The Development of My Work

The idea of the family as a frame of reference began developing as I worked intensively on my drawing skills. With the use of Conte' pencils and kid finish bristol board my family members began to emerge in interesting black, grey and white patterns that demonstrated my interest in dramatic lighting of compositions. The extensive windows in my home had provided the light that fascinated me. Eventually the figures would become secondary as the light, dark and middle values emerged into interesting compositions.

The work from the model each week during studio had provided the discipline for accuracy and acute vision. With

the use of graphite on watercolor and print making paper my drawings began to develop good proportions and interesting placement and environments. At the same time my technical skills of using watercolor washes combined with the drawings began to improve. I found in my attempt to control watercolor I had to draw with my brush as well. Unless I did this the painting was timid and lacked the quality of painterliness. I had to learn to be patient in waiting for wet areas of pigment to dry before placing glazes over wet areas that needed to be preserved for the enrichment of the color. These brush work areas need to be placed on the painting with great skill produced from intensive observation and accurate drawing.

During this time of technical development I experimented with different papers. I found a machine made paper did not allow for the production of fresh layered color washes or glazing. The machine made paper did not possess the surface attributes and properties for watercolor pigments to penetrate and hold color freshly. The pigments became blotchy and overworked when applied after a period of drying and intensified after each additional application of paint.

Arches 140 pound cold press paper, was a definite improvement in the quality of freshness produced but a greater absorbant surface illustrating dark darks of pigment for stronger contrasts was still needed. The possibility of a 300 pound Arches cold press rag paper brought me much closer to the visible freshness of layering pigments and contrast of color values. The visible painterly execution of brush strokes indicated my control of the medium.

Because of the problematic flesh tones in painting the human figure I chose Arches 140 pound hot press paper. This became a delightful activity but again my inexperience caused blotchy and overworked washes as I struggled to develop strong contrasts with overlays of pigment.

Hot press paper was useful for skillful watercolorists wishing to maintain simple, direct and delicate work.

Arches 550 pound cold press paper was my last and final choice. The surface allowed the erasure of the water soluable pencil lines (Stabilos). The composition, texture and weight of the rag paper promoted multiple layered washes that remained fresh and even when dried and excessive water and pigment were removed with good results.

In addition to working from the model and using paper experiments I kept a sketch book to record interesting events and places involving figures and light patterns. Light patterns became an important element.

### Serialization

Serialization lends itself particularly well to the principle of reductiveness in art, that is by increasing simplification of structure to the point that shape and composition as such virtually disappear from the pictorial surface. Serialization refers to the variation of formal themes within given conceptual conditions with a given number of elements and a characteristic combination of these elements. It is not nearly a variation on a theme but a renewal of the basic problem each time. All painting insofar as it is a problem solving activity, involves a form of serialization.



In the following photographs I will outline the serialization I went through to achieve the finished work for my thesis.



No. 4 This is the original pencil drawing from life for "The Breakfast Table".



No. 5 The first attempt of "The Breakfast Table" was painted in watercolor.



No. 6 "The Breakfast Table", a wood cut, helped to develop strong light patterns, contrasts and middle tones.



No. 7 "The Breakfast Table", was the second water-color developed with a simplification of detail.





No. 8 Combining watercolor and pastel to produce softer but defined light patterns, "The Breakfast Table" assumes an atmospheric attitude.



No. 9 Executed entirely in watercolors, once again, "The Breakfast Table" exhibits strong simple patterns, delineation of more detail and improvement of color relationships and values.

The final painting is No. 16 on Page 20.

The Thesis Show Series

The first finished painting, "Barbara and Sam" was a watercolor rendering. There was still much documentation but the light filtering through the window curtains was starting to take place. Composition of environment and figure had improved from my earlier work. In addition my color palette was undergoing a change from photographic documentation to delicately balanced neutrals and intuitive color. Some areas of the painting were already achieving the results I was after. "Barbara and Sam" painted from life, was not included in the gallery show.



No. 10 Barbara and Sam



No. 11 A Sunday Afternoon No. 1

The second painting, painted on location, on print making paper but the first with two figures painted in the large 40 inch by 30 inch size was a little more successful. The silvery light I had been trying to capture started to emerge. The documentation of the obvious was diminished to allow the light to cascade across the painting. The left side of the painting needed less detail for the entire painting to flow together. This would require a repainting of the entire scene to understate areas that had been overstated documentarily. This painting was not included in the gallery show.

In "Sunday Afternoon No. 2", painted from life, unimportant details such as lamps, furniture, buttons and documented portraits were eliminated. The search for spirituality, light patterns and elimination of the obvious had finally begun to take place. Each time I painted the same scene another aspect of the serial became prominent.



No. 12 A Sunday Afternoon No. 2



A repositioning of the figures in the same environment to create a different psychology developed the painting called, "Worlds Apart". It was time to move on to other situations in the family circle that would express another facet of social development through group living.



No. 13 Worlds Apart



The Sisters Series (A Series within a Series)

I painted the serial of girls communicating or reading in a garden, in as sincere a contemporary spirit as my technical skill could allow. Actually there were three paintings in all. One is missing due to an event that all watercolorists face: Overwork. Both paintings were painted from life with no preliminary drawings.

No. 14  
The Garden



No. 15  
Romance





No. 16 The final painting of "The Breakfast Table" was painted from life.

No. 17 The "Shut-ins" painted from life, had no previous drawings. For this painting I relied completely on memory pattern and intuition.





No. 18 "Assurance" was painted from life. No series was used for this painting. It was my first attempt of this subject.

No. 19 Self Portrait The first and second portraits were rendered in charcoal and pastel respectively. The need to document my image was no longer necessary. It was important to express the close space and lovely filtering light always present in my home.



### Final Statement

I believe the human spirit is strong, alive and well today. One way of celebrating its existence is in the family, the basic unit that propagates the total extended family of mankind. Time and values change but humanity and the struggle of the human spirit goes on forever. Each generation looking back to the past, observing the present and inventing the future attempts to document and create the immediate. Out of these attempts I believe spirituality arises recording the inner spirit through art.



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Footnotes

1. John Ashbury and Kenneth Moffett, Fairfield Porter, Realist Painter in the Age of Abstraction, (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1982) p.1
2. Library of Great Painters, Edouard Vuillard, (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc.) p.12
3. Ibid., p.98
4. Robert Rosenblum, Whitney Museum of American Art, Alex Katz, (New York: Rizzoli International Pub. 1986) p.14
5. Barbara Ehrlich White ed., Camille Pissarro, Letters to Son Lucien 1898, 1900, 1903, Impressionism in Perspective, (Engelwood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1978) p.35
6. Frank Getlein, Mary Cassatt, Paintings and Prints, (New York: Abberville Press Pub. 1980) p.8
7. Patricia Hills, Whitney Museum of Modern Art, John Singer Sargent, (New York: Harry N. Abrams Pub. 1986) p.27
8. Ibid., p.147

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